God's Moral Standards – Leviticus 18-27

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Leviticus 18-27

Introduction

Last week we discussed the laws God gave to the sons of Israel concerning sacrifices and ceremonial purity. If God was going to dwell in the Tabernacle in the midst of their camp, then they needed to know how to approach Him properly, otherwise they were at risk of being destroyed. God is loving, merciful, kind, gracious, patient and longsuffering, but He is also holy, righteous and just. Sin cannot continue in His presence without judgement coming. The sacrificial system was set up so that there could be atonement for sin, and the purity laws were set up so that they would not come before God in an unclean state. (See: *The Sacrificial System*)

This morning I am going to give you an overview of the laws in Leviticus 18-27. These chapters contain both ceremonial laws that separated the Jews from all other people and moral laws which define right and wrong, good and evil. Familiarity with the ceremonial laws can help us understand Jewish culture in both the Old and New Testament as well as give insight into the many ways in which Jesus fulfilled the types within those laws. The moral laws still have application for us today since they are repeated or referred to in the New Testament. Both types of laws give us insight into the character and nature of God.

I will be pointing out both types of laws, but I will be putting greater emphasis upon the moral laws since they do give us standards for our own conduct. We live in a time in which our freedom in Christ is emphasized so much that many professing Christians have become licentious in their manner of life. They believe that since they are saved from the punishment of Hell by Christ's death that they can do whatever they want. Many of them will often use religious terminology of some type to justify what they do, but the reality is that they are openly practicing things that are sinful and bring shame to the name of Christ. Just because a person claims that they are being led by God or the Spirit does not mean that the claim is true. Claiming your conscience is clean may only reveal that your conscience has been seared. Neither what we believe, or how we feel, or what our conscience dictates is the source of truth nor do they set the standards for our conduct. The source of truth is the Word of God, the Scriptures, and they set the standards of our conduct. Your beliefs are to be changed to match the Bible. Your conscience is to be trained according to its standards so that you might not sin against God (Psalm 119:11). Your feelings are to follow after you have committed yourself to the truth and put it into practice.

Throughout the New Testament there are many calls for the believer to set aside their sinful practices and walk in holiness. In Romans 6 Paul gives the command *"do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts"* but instead to "present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (Romans 6:12, 14). Paul adds that being under grace instead of the law is not an excuse to sin (vs. 14f). In Colossians 3:5 we are told to *"consider the members of your earthly body as dead"* to various sinful practices. Galatians 5:24 tells us, *"Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."* The Apostle Peter tells us that we are to be "obedient children" and not to be conformed to our former lusts for we are to be holy (1 Peter 1:14-16). In 2 Peter 3:11 he asks the rhetorical question, *"what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness"* in light of the fact that this world will be burned up and a new heaven and earth would be created.

What then are the standards by which we should live? The moral laws in Leviticus and other Old Testament books can give us additional insights in to the commands and principles that are given to us in the New Testament.

Laws on Immoral Relations – Leviticus 18

Leviticus 18 begins with the Lord's instructions for what Moses was to teach the people. Verse 3 begins, "*You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. 4 'You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the Lord your God. 5 'So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord*." They were not to be like the Egyptians or the Cannanites, and there would be blessings if they would obey the Lord and curses if they did not. Among the practices of the Egyptians and Cannanites were various kinds of immorality for which they were judged (vs. 24-25). Leviticus 18 gives the specific prohibitions and warnings that those who practiced them would defile themselves and be cut off from among their people (vs. 6-30).

The New Testament gives many commands concerning immorality. There are the specific commands against adultery and fornication such as in Romans 13:9, 1 Corinthians 6:9; Hebrews 13:4 and James 2:11. Adultery is an immoral sexual relationship outside of marriage. Fornication is an immoral sexual relationship prior to marriage. There are also the more general laws against immorality such as 1 Corinthians 6 which says that the body is not for immorality and that we are to flee it (vs. 13, 18). Galatians 5:19 lists immorality as one of the deeds of the flesh which are contrasted with the fruit of the spirit. Ephesians 5:3 &5 tell us that we are not to let immorality or impurity be named among us and that no immoral man has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Colossians 3:5 calls on us to consider our bodies as dead to immorality. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 states directly that the will of God is our sanctification which includes abstaining from sexual immorality. Leviticus 18 tells us what God declares to be immoral.

Included in the list of prohibitions were rules on incest which would include immediate family including step parents and siblings and in-laws as well as consanguinity (marriage to too near a relative) which would include aunts and uncles, and in a polygamous family, marriage to women who are blood relatives. Also listed as immoral are adultery, homosexuality and bestiality.

Leviticus 20:10-21 gives further explanation on immoral behaviors stating the specific penalties beyond being cut off from the people that would occur. All those involved in cases of adultery, incest, homosexuality or bestiality were to be put to death and their bloodguilitiness was to be upon them. Those who married an aunt, uncle or sister-in-law would bear their sin and die childless. The same penalty was given in the case of marriage to a sister-in-law. This is assumed to be a marriage following a divorce, not death, for Deuteronomy 25:5 gives the law of a kinsman redeemer in which a brother is to take his sister-in -law if his brother dies and raise up a son in his brother's name.

There are those that will incorrectly use these laws and based on them claim that Abraham could not have been godly since he was married to his half-sister, a relationship excluded under these laws. Remember what I pointed out back in Genesis 4 when discussing Cain and his descendants. It would not have been wrong for him to have married a sister for three reasons. First, there was no other choice since with the exception of his mother, every woman in existence was his sister. Second, God gave no commands against such a marriage until the Mosaic Law which we are now examining in Leviticus 18. Third, there would not have been genetic defects in the first humans, and it would have taken some time for an accumulation of mutated chromosomes to become a genetic load dangerous to their offspring. It is the accumulation of errors in the genetic code that cause the physical problems of closely interbred families. (See: *The Spread of Sin*). While marriage to a sister had been acceptable in prior times, God was now banning it.

Leviticus also has laws specifically against harlotry for it profaned the woman and the land by filling it with lewdness (19:29). Levites were not allowed to take a woman profaned by harlotry as a wife (21:7) and were only allowed to marry a virgin of his own people (21:14). A priest's daughter that profaned herself by harlotry was to be burned (21:9). Paul addresses this issue specifically in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 stating that Christians who practice prostitution are joining Christ to the harlot and warning us to flee all immorality. Why? Because *"every [other] sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body,* and our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and have been bought with the price of Jesus' death, so that we should glorify God with our bodies.

That same New Testament admonishment applies to all cases of fornication. While Leviticus deals with that issue in more general terms, Deuteronomy gives instruction about particular situations in seeking to protect women from men who would force themselves upon them, while at the same time bringing punishment upon those that willingly participate in fornication.

Why have I spent so much time on this subject? Because we live in a society that has lost its moral bearings and now openly advocates nearly every type of immorality as normal and good. I have heard professing Christians use the same justifications and excuses for their immorality as non-Christians. God's commands concerning human sexual relationships have not changed, and they are simple. Within marriage, it is yes. Anything else is perversion and God warns about its consequences including that it is a sin against one'ss own body (1 Corinthians 6:18). What needless tragedy people bring upon themselves by their sexual immorality. The emotional pain is only the top layer of the calamities suffered, for there are also the physical and medical traumas and diseases, some of which are not only painful and debilitating but can also cause sterility, and some such as syphilis and AIDS lead to death. After all these natural consequences there is still God's judgement that has to be faced. This brings additional condemnation upon the non-Christian (1 Corinthians 6:9-10), and while Christians can be forgiven in Christ, there are additional consequences for them too. Do not ever think that being a Christian gives you license to sin. The Christian that sins is brought under conviction by the Holy Spirit, is to be admonished and corrected by fellow believers and is subjects to God's direct chastisement (Heb. 12:4-11). If those things do not happen, then you have fooled yourself and you do not belong to the Lord, for if you are without His discipline, you are illegitimate and not a son (vs. 8).

Let me add here that Jesus also made it clear that immorality was a condition of the heart because the heart was the source of the immoralities (Matthew 15:18-20). That is why Jesus equated looking at a woman to lust after her with adultery (Matthew 5:28). Christians are to set their minds on the things above and not the things of this earth (Colossians 3:2). We are to *"put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to [its] lusts"* (Romans 13:14). We should set no worthless thing before our eyes (Psalm 101:3). These commands cover a host of issues from girl (or guy) watching to every form of pornography regardless of its source. You need to destroy any pornographic materials you have including any printed matter, film, videos or graphics files. Any computer you use should have filters and blocking programs activated to help protect you from the garbage on the internet. It is also wise to set up accountability programs to further reduce temptation. You also need to be discerning and discriminating in what movies, videos and DVDs you see as well as television programing, for even the commercials and coverage of sporting events are now often filled with sexually provocative and even pornographic images. Make sure what you watch matches the criteria of Philippians 4:8. (See: *Rejoicing in All Circumstances*)

Laws on Idolatry & False Worship

Leviticus 19:4 and 26:1 cover general issues of idolatry which are in reality just expansions of the first two of the Ten Commandments not to have other gods and not to make idols or graven images to worship them. To these prohibitions are added other objects of false worship such as sacred pillars and figured stones. Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2-5 also cover the particular issue of the worship of the false god, Molech, which was practiced by some the Canaanites. This was spiritual harlotry which was why it is included in the list of immoralities. One of its rituals included passing children through fire in dedicating them to Molech. One idol form was a bronze

statue with a bulls head and outstretched arms. It was hollow and could be heated and the child would be laid in and burned in the arms of the statue. Depending on the heat and length of time the child was left in the arms it could be a ritual passing with minimal harm to the child, or it could be a sacrifice of the child's life by fire to Molech. Those who practiced such worship were to be stoned, and if the people of the community did not do so, then the Lord would set Himself against those people and cut them off.

The New Testament also gives warning of idolatry. The apostle John concludes his epistle *"Little children, guard yourselves from idols"* (1 John 5:21) and Peter and Paul both warn against it (1 Peter 4:3; 1 Corinthians 10:7). Paul includes it the list of the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:20) and states that immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed amount to idolatry (Colossians 3:5). While most do not think of Americans as idolatrous since statues and graven images of false gods are not as common here as in other lands, these equivalents of idolatry are quite common in our society and also ordinary temptations to Christians, so the warnings against idolatry are directed to us too. In addition, the worship of statues and graven images has increased dramatically as people with idolatrous practices have immigrated here, and their ideas and practices do influence our society. There are also religious groups that profess to be Christian that do use statues or graven images in their worship rituals and their people are called to bow to them in veneration. All of that is idolatry.

There were additional laws related to other forms of false worship. These were expansions on the first or third of the Ten Commandments not to have other gods or not to take the Lord's name in vain.

Leviticus 19:12 commands not to swear falsely by the Lord's name for it profanes it. Jesus told us not to swear at all by the Lord but to let your "yes" be "yes," and your "no" be "no," f
or anything beyond that was of evil (Matthew 5:37).

Another form of false worship was not following the Lord's commands concerning ceremonial purity and worshiping Him properly (Leviticus 19:5-8; 21:1-24:9; 27:1-34). There was various punishments depending on the violation ranging from paying restitution and a fine, tp making a sacrifice, to being cut off from the people, to capital punishment for certain offenses such as blasphemy. While Christians are not under obligation to keep the ceremonial laws, those laws do give us some insight into the principles of worshiping the Lord properly. Christians are to worship the Lord in spirit and truth (John 4:24) which includes not only coming before God with the proper reverent and humble attitude (James 4:6; Hebrews 12:28; 1 Peter 5:5), but also making sure we are paying attention to God's doctrines and not the myths, teachings and commandments of men (Ephesians 4:11-15; 1 Timothy 1:4; 4:1-7; Titus 1:14; Hebrews 13:9, etc.). God's kingdom and righteousness are to be sought first (Matthew 6:33), and we are to walk in a manner worthy of Him (Ephesians 4:1), for God is worthy of our best.

Another form of false worship is given in Leviticus 19:26, 31 which warn against occultic practices such as divination, soothsaying and consulting mediums and spiritists. The Lord would set His face against those who did such things and they were to be cut off from among the people (Leviticus 20:6). They were also warned against following particular customs and practices used by the Canaanites in their pagan religious rituals. These included certain hair styles, cutting themselves for the dead and religious tatoos (Leviticus

19:27-28; 21:5). While we have more freedom in the New Testament we still have the principle of avoiding those things that are clearly identified with the worship of false gods. We are not to take our worship practices from them nor are we appear to be like them.

The Thessalonians were commended for their obvious turning from their pagan idolatry to the worship of the true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The Ephesians believers brought their books of pagan magic rituals and burned them though they had great monetary worth (Acts 19:17). 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 calls for us to be separate from Belial, unbelievers and idols and cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit. That does not mean not having any association with unbelievers, for then we would have to go out of the world (1 Corinthians 5:9-10), but it does mean we are not to be yoked with them and there are to be distinctions between us because we are to walk in holiness. (See the *Holy, but Free* sermon series). (Being *"all things to all men"* – 1 Corinthians 9:22 – does not mean participating in unholy practices).

Laws Related to Stealing and Coveting

Leviticus 19:11 states directly *"You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another."* The New Testament repeats these same commandments (Ephesians 4:25, 28; 1 Corinthians 6:8-11). Included in this would be oppressing a neighbor, robbing him or withholding the wages of a hired man (Leviticus 19:13), having just measurements in weights and capacities (Leviticus 20:35-36), doing no wrong to strangers (Leviticus 20:33-34).

Laws Related to Love & Kindness

Leviticus 19:18 commands *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself."* Paul repeats the command in Galatians 5:14 saying that it is the fulfillment of the law. James 2:8 calls it the "royal law." Jesus repeated it several times including in Matthew 22:39 where He said that the whole Law and prophets depended on it and the command to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. In Matthew 5:43-48 Jesus went beyond this to also command His followers to love their enemies and pray for those that persecuted them.

Among the ways Leviticus says that love to a neighbor was to be shown included not hating them, bearing a grudge against them or taking vengeance upon them, but you could reprove a neighbor as needed (19:17-18). Cruelties such as cursing a deaf man or putting a stumbling block in front of a blind man were forbidden (Leviticus 19:14). Another kindness was to leave the corners of a field unharvested for the care of the poor who were also allowed to glean the fields (Leviticus 19:9-10). This was a way to provide for the poor while still allowing them the dignity of labor. I know some people think the poor should be provided for without making them work, but Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 *"if anyone will not work , neither let him eat."* The New Testament follows the same principles as the Old Testament.

Justice and kindness were also shown in the various laws of redemption in Leviticus 25. These were means by which property, including people sold into servitude, would be restored or freedom gained by either waiting to the year of jubilee or by someone else paying the price of redemption to gain the freedom or restore the property before that time. Jesus' death was the redemption price by which we were redeemed from our bondage to sin and Satan (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18). Leviticus 25:35-38 required them to care for

the poor among them and restricted them from charging usury or interest on anything borrowed or given to the poor. A Christian that has the means and sees a brother in need is to meet that need (1 John 3:17). In fact, one of the reasons for working is to have the means to be able to meet such needs (Ephesians 4:28).

Laws Related to Justice

Leviticus 19:15-16 required impartial justice which included not slandering a neighbor or acting against him. This was in keeping with the ninth commandment not to bear false witness. Deuteronomy 19:15-21 added the requirement of having two or three witnesses in order to establish a matter which made it more difficult for a false witness to bring a charge. Christians are also charged not to slander (Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8) and the requirement for multiple witnesses is also repeated (2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19).

Leviticus 24:17-23 places restrictions on punishment by limiting it to only the harm that the person had caused. This was to be the standard for everyone. The common response of mankind is to carry out a punishment greater than the harm caused and especially if they are a foreigner.

Laws Related to Giving Honor.

Leviticus 19:3 repeats the commands to reverence your mother and father. That is a command repeated in the New Testament in Ephesians 6:1-3 for it is the basis of the command for children to obey their parents. Related to this is the command in Leviticus 19:32 to *"rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged."* This is a means of showing respect. This would be included in the New Testament regarding the treatment of those who are older. We are to render custom and honor to those to whom it belongs (Romans 13:7). The younger are to be in humble submission to their elders (1 Peter 5:5). Widows are to be cared for (1 Timothy 5:3-16). Older people are not to be sharply rebuked, but rather are to be appealed to as a father (1 Timothy 5:1).

Laws Related to the Sabbath

Leviticus 19:3; 20:30, and 26:2 repeat the command to keep the Lord's Sabbaths. This would include the special Sabbaths such as those related to the required religious feasts detailed in Leviticus 23 as well as the regular weekly Sabbaths. The Sabbath and feast commands are not repeated in the New Testament to Christians, but understanding that they are but shadows of what is to come and that the real substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16), we are to regard and observe each day as we believe the Lord would desire us to do (Romans 14:5-6).

Blessings and Penalties – Leviticus 26

In Leviticus 26 the Lord details the blessings for obeying His commands and the penalties for disobedience. These will be detailed again in Deuteronomy 27-30. We will see these promises put into action throughout the rest of the history of Israel for they were blessed when the followed God and they were cursed when they did not.

The specific blessings included the proper seasonal rains, bountiful crops, peace in the land from enemies and wild beasts, victory in battle, abundance of children and a confirmed covenant in which God would make His dwelling among them and walk among them.

The specific curses increased as the disobedience continued. Curse for the first level included terrors, consumption and fevers, crops that would be eaten by their enemies for they would be defeated by them and ruled by them. Continued disobedience would result in a curse on the land so that it would not yield its produce or fruit. Continued disobedience would result in plagues, wild beasts that would kill their children and animals. Continued disobedience would bring the curse of invasion by enemies resulting in sieges and famines. Continued disobedience would result in famine so bad they would turn to cannibalism, their sites of false religious worship would be destroyed along with their cities and the land which would be left desolate. The land would remain in that condition until all the days of Sabbaths which were not observed would be fulfilled. The people that would be left would be fearful and be carried away by their enemies. However, even in captivity God would not forget them or break His covenant with them. Their only hope would be to confess their sins and the sins of their forefathers so that God would remember His covenant and restore them.

Conclusions

God is the same today as He was then. He still requires His people to walk with Him in holiness. His moral laws are still to be upheld. If there is a parallel in the New Testament it is legitimate to look to the Old Testament for examples of how to carry out the principles. Deuteronomy contains additional specific insights into God's moral standards for His people. Our civil laws were originally set up on this basis God still blesses for obedience and curses for disobedience. The church is not Israel, so the specific blessings and curses are very different, but the general principle is the same. While the Christian has no promise of avoiding trouble by obedience to God, for we are warned that *"all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"* (2 Timothy 3:12), we can know His peace and the joy of fellowship with Him even in the midst of such things. If our lives are marked by disobedience the Lord will bring His discipline upon us (Hebrews 12:4-11). In the case of the Corinthian Christians this included not only admonishments, but also sickness and even death for some (1 Corinthians 11:30).

What is your relationship to God's moral laws? Are they of concern to you? Are you familiar with what they are? Are you striving to walk in them? I pray that your answer is "yes" to all of them. If they are not of concern to you, then I will pray and ask the others here to pray that God will get your attention so that they become a concern to you. You cannot walk with God and glorify Him properly unless they are. If your familiarity and ability to walk in them lacks, then understand that is one of the reasons for the body of Christ and this local church in particular. We exist to glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ and that includes teaching people whatsoever He has commanded (Matthew 28:20). Opportunities for this range from our basic individual discipleship ministry

through advanced training classes. Talk with me or any church leader so that we can direct you to the next step you can take in learning to properly walk with God for His glory.

Sermon Study Sheets

KIDS CORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help.

Young Children – draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. **Older Children –** Do one or more of the following: 1) Write down all the verses mentioned in the sermon and look them up later. 2) Count how many times a references is made to one of God's laws. Talk with your parents about how you are doing at living by God's standards.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Questions to consider in discussing the sermon with others. Which Old Testament laws apply to Christians and which do not? Explain. What is the value of Old Testament laws for the Christian? How would you describe American society in its relationships to God's standards? How would you describe the average American Christian in their relationship to God's standards? What expectations does God have concerning a Christian's manner of life? What adjectives should describe a Christian's character? What does the New Testament have to say about adultery and fornication? What is the difference between the two? What are the penalties for immorality – Old Testament and New Testament? What does the New Testament say about harlots? What are some of the natural consequences of sexual sins? What are the spiritual consequences for a non-Christian? A Christian? What is the source of immoralities? What can you do to protect yourself against immorality? What types of idolatry exist in our nation? What dangers do these pose for Christians? What does it mean to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)? What dangers are there for occultic practices to enter into church practice? What protections can be set up against them? What is the relationship between theft and modern business practices? How does loving your neighbor fulfill the law? What are some of the practical ways love can be shown to your neighbors? What responsibilities does the Christian have towards the poor? Why is slander such an evil? What are some of the ways in which you show respect to the elderly in American culture? Why are Christians not required to keep the Sabbath? What are they supposed to do? What blessings have you experienced in obeying the Lord? What penalties have you experienced when you have disobeyed Him? How well do you know God's moral standards?